Getting Back to Basics

Richard Isnor, Director, Innovation, Policy and Science
IDRC Photo: M. Valberg/Valberg Imaging

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Profile of IDRC's Innovation, Policy and Science (IPS) program area

The creation of the Innovation, Policy and Science (IPS) program area in 2005 “brings IDRC back to its roots, in some respects,” explains Richard Isnor, IPS’ Director, who moved to IDRC from the National Research Council of Canada.

“Science and technology policy activities were one of the initial core investments made by the organization,” he adds, noting that the *IDRC Act* of 1970 states “the objects of the Centre are to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical, and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions.”

> “We ... seek opportunities to promote, sustain, and expand linkages with Canadian research institutions involved in international development, and looking at global issues that have an impact on developing countries and Canada.”
> *CS+PF 2005–2010 (PF, para. 87)*

Today, there’s a renewed recognition, as Isnor expresses it, that “explicit attention on science, technology — and particularly on innovative capacity — is central to the development process, that innovation is critical to enabling socioeconomic development.”

In a segmented world, knowledge is unevenly distributed between regions and even within countries, contributing to a growing chasm between the privileged and the poor — between those with solid economic and social prospects and those without.

Africa, a continent with 13% of the world’s population but only 1.2% of the world’s researchers, is clearly in need of enhanced innovative capacity to spark economic growth and enable Africans to deal with critical challenges in such areas as health and agriculture.

More broadly, a task force of the United Nations' Millennium Project concluded that in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals — the UN's benchmarks for advances in key areas such as health, education, gender equality, and environmental protection — "countries will need to … develop strategies to harness the explosion in new knowledge."

While the catalytic power of scientific and technological innovation is well established, the question of what ingredients or conditions can nurture a culture of innovation remains more of a mystery.

A good balance between investments in primary education — where curiosity is first encouraged in young children — and in higher learning, where specialized knowledge is generated, has been cited as one factor. Governments' science and technology policies are also crucial.

Technical factors such as the structure of national banking systems, the ability of developing-country research institutions to plug into global stocks of knowledge, and the collaborative abilities of government agencies can all contribute to the success or failure of innovative enterprises.

A systems approach

Rather than concerning itself with promoting specific technologies — say, in energy or alternative technology — IPS is primarily focused on how those enabling conditions interact with one another within particular national contexts. "We want to look at it from a systems point of view," says Isnor.

"What's needed in terms of training and learning about those technologies so that they will work? And what are the social factors driving the technology? Are there barriers to social acceptance of the technology? And who is invited to debate whether the technology is appropriate and whether the benefits will be distributed equitably?"

"This unbalanced distribution of scientific activity generates serious problems not only for the scientific community in the developing countries, but for development itself. It accelerates the disparity between advanced and developing countries, creating social and economic difficulties at both national and international levels. The idea of two worlds of science is anathema to the scientific spirit. It will require the commitment of scientists and scientific institutions throughout the world to change that portrait to bring the benefits of science to all."
Kofi Annan, "A Challenge to the World's Scientists," Editorial, Science, 7 March 2003, vol. 299, no. 5612, p. 1485.

IPS' Challenge Fund addresses a "systems approach" to science and research capacity development through partnerships. The Fund creates new strategic partnerships between developing-world specialists and Canadian institutions and funding agencies, both to leverage Canadian expertise for the benefit of the developing world and to give IDRC a more prominent voice in domestic science and technology policy discussions.

One existing model for such partnerships is the Global Health Research Initiative, which has successfully brought the contributions of IDRC, CIDA, Health Canada, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research together to act on pressing global health issues such as the containment and treatment of infectious diseases.

As well, the new IPS program, Innovation, Technology and Society, is helping build research capacity to support policy-relevant research in developing countries — a longstanding IDRC concern.

A specific focus within this program is to increase social inclusion in science and technology policymaking through means such as multistakeholder consultations. Such broad-range involvement is widely viewed as key to the healthy functioning of innovation systems, and can offset an observed tendency for innovation to disproportionately benefit the socially advantaged in developing countries.

Although science policy and innovative systems are themes deeply interwoven with the work of other IDRC program areas, creating IPS ensures that "what's everybody's concern doesn't by default become nobody's," says Isnor. "Since innovation is so central to the process of development, it deserves explicit attention."